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## THE PLAYGROUND AS A SOCIAL CENTER

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Chicago.

The rallying place has always been a necessity rather than a luxury to human beings of all classes and nationalities. Whether it is the crossroad store or the old halfway house of the frontier, or the courthouse with shaded grove of the old South, or the picturesque piazza around which the remotest medieval mountain village is built, all have served as social clearing centers, furnishing opportunity for one to measure one's self with one's fellows, get new social notions, and better standards of what is acceptable to those "higher up." Since cities are no longer built about a forum, or market-place, or the *Rathaus*, it has become necessary for individuals and groups to use such places as chance leaves available, though inadequate and undesirable. The necessity to rally and the social desire to congregate still hold sway, after the old village landmarks have vanished.

In medieval times the church or the cathedral opened out on the town square, and the places for eating, drinking or buying did likewise, and the town well, with friendly curb, was frequently at the center. "Meet me at the fountain" is a clever appeal of certain advertisers to this time-old and traditional social instinct for a rallying center. Only too often American villages have grown up into towns and become great cities before it was remembered to set apart suitable spaces for the community rallying center. The real estate success has completely swallowed up every last vacant lot. Wide, green prairies have been, and are being, absorbed and transformed into towns and become great cities without any consideration of the get-together nature of the dwellers in those same tenements. In proportion to this oversight, artificial "resorts" spring up, some crude, others vulgar or debasing, each of which gives urgent testimony on behalf of the neglected, violated sociability of human beings. It is this sociability, which the German people call *Gemüth*,

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that is the very heart of creative and poetic life, and which the English poet describes as the intimation of immortality, which neither neglect, nor perversion, "nor all that is at enmity with joy, can utterly abolish or destroy."

It is now becoming necessary for short-sighted communities to reclaim areas and set them apart for the social needs of the people. The small-park movement of Chicago, which has challenged the admiration of the world as the greatest of civic achievements, has come none too soon. New York City, among other reclamations, recently purchased at the price of \$1,000,000 one wee bit of space, which it might open up to the sky for the children of a certain tenement block. A remarkable awakening has come to our entire country with reference to the need of play spaces and open-air spots in the cities. It has come like a conversion, in answer to the prayers of women's clubs, social settlements, kindergarten associations, and the men and women who are believers in the common good. Sites for playgrounds have been readily acquired through municipal taxation, as gifts from private benefactors and as purchases by playground associations. The Playground Association of America was organized a little over three years ago in the city of Washington, having for its original purpose the plotting of the "city beautiful," with reference to providing adequate playgrounds for the children of our national capital. Three great conventions have been held by this organization, and its bureau and staff of workers are meeting a flood of inquiry, and compiling a steady stream of reports of the growth of the movement throughout the country. In addition to the usual addresses and conferences on play and playground interests such as were to be expected at such a convention, the program has reached its climax in a great public festival of play and sport and games. In Chicago, where the first of these national play festivals was held, the Playground Association conducts an annual all-day festival, which has been witnessed by as many as 30,000 people, and in which organizations of all kinds, including the public schools, playgrounds and Turn Verein have gladly participated. During the past year play festivals have been held in hundreds of cities and schools, over twenty local festivals of great social and play significance having been held in Chicago alone.

In the early stages of propagating the playground idea, the

arguments most frequently heard were those of the health and fresh-air benefits to children in crowded districts, such as the reduction of tubercular tendencies and other evils. While the playground has been found to be the greatest antidote to such human frailties as result from cramped quarters, deoxygenized air and social isolation, it has also been observed that the same social problems, as well as the same social opportunities, exist there as are to be found in any other center where human beings rally.

For some time thoughtful men and women have been saying, it is not enough to furnish the place and tell the children to play. These men and women are now saying there must be leadership in the playground, and leadership of several kinds. At one time it was considered sufficient to have a police guard representing authority. Later, gymnasium directors were added, to control and develop the games, sports and athletics. Still later, an able manager for the entire field was provided, with various assistants, such as musicians, librarians, kindergartners, swimming teachers and story tellers. Only to-day has the greatest opportunity of all come to be recognized, and a social worker is being hired—yes, paid for twelve months in a year by park commissions—to cultivate and harvest those finer fruits of the social nature.

On a recent visit to a playground which assembles many nationalities, including blacks and whites, I was told by the policeman who has been on that beat since the ground opened, that it was all hopeless; that there never would be any good come out of it; that "they fight and pester as much as they did in the beginning." I then turned to the manager of the playground, a young man of considerable understanding, who testified with great enthusiasm that he saw an evolution not only in individuals, but in the actions of the group as a whole, which made it all worth while. The one was only the "cop" to the children of the playground, while the other was a companion and leader in those very activities which surge up only too violently where 400 are gathered together in a 100-foot-square yard. How much more may not be promoted and recognized by an intelligently equipped social worker who makes it a business to develop that great human passion for social organization and social communion. It is a well-known statement among educators that children reveal themselves in their play. The playground leader has the opportunity to see and know not only child

nature, but human nature at its very fountain, and to direct this nature up into the forms most acceptable to society as a whole.

Not long since a bunch of boys of a harum-scarum club entertained their mothers at a dance in a nearby field-house at the suggestion of one who saw the full significance of such a social endeavor. Again, where antagonistic groups of a certain district refused to mingle, a much-looked-up-to person gave a party, inviting as her guests all concerned, and all came, glad to be honored and counted eligible.

The most significant statement made at the great National Play Convention held in Pittsburg last May was as follows: "When the family splits up for its recreation, there is danger. When young people take their places apart by themselves without a wholesome influence of family life, there is danger. Only when the family stays together do we have wholesome conditions. Our social traditions are the most precious elements of civilization and of cultivated life. These great traditions are not carried by the individual, but by the group."

The social leader of the playground or the recreation building will bring the old people back into the game, and will supply forms of folk recreation and invite the participation of those who do not "two-step"; in other words, will warm up the child nature, the play spirit, in the old man and the old woman, and so keep the passing generation in sympathetic accord with the generation which is just unfolding. One of the prettiest stories in playground history is the true story of a certain rich citizen who bequeathed a great tract lying outside the city for a playground. When asked why such a remote place was selected, the answer came: "That is where I rambled and wandered on the old homestead place as a boy, and it ought never to be used for any other purpose."

I have already said that the playground site has been relatively easy to secure. It has not been so easy to interest the authorities in providing trained leaders and socially developed leaders. However, the need is being shown and the demand for trained workers has been recognized to the extent that the National Playground Association has a standing committee and an appropriation of money for organizing a course of study for such training. The tentative report of this committee, a document of nearly 300 pages, has just been issued and extensively circulated.

London has a recreation committee which publishes and makes available full accounts of all the recreation privileges of that city. The New York City Recreation Committee has just issued a pamphlet describing and directing people to the public recreation facilities of the great metropolis. When Chicago builds the proposed great social center on the lake front in Grant Park, another monument will have been erected to this social instinct which lies just back of the entire series of manifestations which children and adults reveal in their recreations, namely, seeking companionship, testing and measuring themselves against each other, enjoying, imitating and emulating—in other words, ripening socially.